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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH JEWEL HOWARD TAYLOR

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield for reasons 1.4 B and D.

¶1. (C) The Ambassador met with former First Lady and current Senior Senator from Bong County Jewel Howard Taylor February 10, at the Senator's request. Taylor remarked that she has not been invited to the Embassy since 2000 or 2001 because of her inclusion on the UN Travel Ban List, and said she appreciated the chance to begin a dialogue to build a better Liberia. Taylor, who was eloquent, passionate, and smart, said she wanted people to get to know her in her current capacity as a Senator, rather than thinking of her as a "past First Lady." Though her staff had told us she wanted to discuss being removed from the Travel Ban List, Taylor did not raise the issue. Instead, she was astute enough to use this as an introductory meeting; she probably intends to seek additional audiences in the future.

¶2. (U) Taylor was very vocal about the need to fight corruption in Liberia and particularly upset at how the County Development Funds in Bong County were "squandered." She felt that Bong County Superintendent Rennie Jackson's mismanagement of funds earmarked to rebuild roads and rehabilitate a school and clinic warranted his permanent dismissal. President Sirleaf, however, reinstated Jackson last month after Bong County citizens protested her earlier suspension of him. Taylor said that Jackson successfully rallied his "cheering squad" to persuade the President to reconsider, but that the majority of Bong County citizens actually want him out. Taylor said she believes it is her duty as a Legislator to oversee the actions of the Executive, especially in her county, and does not think publicizing wrong-doing equals "interfering" with another branch of government.

¶3. (U) On the Threshold Bill (redistricting process), Taylor seemed to have abandoned her earlier position that the Legislature can not afford to add additional seats to the House of Representatives. She now stated that the best "political compromise" would be a deal where the smallest counties retain at least two Representatives, even if the whole House must be expanded. Taylor, who is Chairman of the Senate Committee on Elections, said her committee would attend a retreat with its House counterpart soon to draft two threshold options for both chambers to consider in Plenary. She agreed with the Ambassador that the 2011 elections will be a crucial test of Liberia's budding democracy and said the Legislature will do everything it can to make sure they are held on time. She also said that the Legislature will work to make the National Elections Commission financially autonomous from the Ministry of Finance so there can be no allegations of undue influence by the ruling party in its operations. She and the Ambassador agreed that it would be better if there were only five to seven political parties participating in 2011 (versus 22 in 2005) so voters could move past personalities and on to debating important issues for Liberia's future. She asked for the USG's ongoing assistance to help build capacity in the Legislature.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Taylor was polished and articulate, and came across as someone who sincerely cares about the future of Liberia and about fighting corruption. Her advocacy for a

Threshold Bill could be very influential in getting both chambers to compromise on a realistic number before the end of this legislative session this summer. She is a member of her ex-husband's National Patriotic Party and she gave us a copy of a booklet describing her activities as First Lady in which he features prominently, so we are not convinced that she has cut all ties with the former regime. Nor would we recommend that her travel ban be lifted should she formally request it. We will, however, continue to follow Taylor's votes and other actions to see if they match her encouraging rhetoric.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD